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ABSTRACT

Encouraging children to create imaginary worlds through writing provides them with ways of coping with the world in which they live, gives them the satisfaction of creating order and experiencing success, and prompts their natural inclinations to plan for a better future. In addition, such planning for utopias can both improve the quality of children's writing and help establish writing as a way of life. (JM)

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THE WORLD OF WRITING: A DIFFERENT KIND OF PLANET

The world of writing is part of the real world, and yet it is a different kind of planet. Actually, there are many worlds of writing. An author may recreate the world as it seems or attempt to create a better world, a simpler world, or perhaps a stranger world. For children, as for older people, writing about a different world can be a way of coping with the world we live in. It can be a highly satisfying experience to write one's way into some kind of orderly world, a world that is manageable. Dr. Leland Jacobs, Professor Emeritus of Columbia University, describes this kind of writing as "ordering the components of existence." The choosing and ordering of components to create a different kind of planet can be very rewarding for children.

For today's children living in our complex, modern world, writing about the world of the past, the world of the future, or the world as they would like it, can be a way of dealing with a part of life, of pinning it down long enough to enjoy it. A supervisor in a school system[1] where children write many of their own books says that writing a story and putting it in a book gives a child a sense of permanence in a fast-changing world. In the world of writing, things can be as the author wishes. When the real world is pressing or overly-complicated, an author can create or recreate a world that is more satisfying. Certainly, to create or recreate a world gives a writer a sense of power. Children who feel insecure or who have low self concepts can get real ego boosts through writing. Here, they can experience control and success. Teachers in the inner city, such as Herbert Kohl, who have freed children

[1]Evelyne Robey, Princeton City Schools, Cincinnati, Ohio

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to write without fear of the red pencil have found an important key to improving self concepts. Whether helping children to cope or building self-concepts, the world of writing has much to offer.

The ability to enter into the world or worlds of writing may offer more than we first realize. It may go beyond the matters of individual coping and improvement of self concepts and become a matter of world survival. Charlotte Huck, the NCTE President-Elect, once said that the ability to fantasize is the ability to survive. We need to be able to imagine the future, to predict what may happen, and to act accordingly. Writing about the future may, in fact, help us to shape the future.

A bleak picture of the future is presented when we imagine a world without many of the things we now take for granted. Yet we can imagine our loss, consider alternatives, and ask what can be done before it is too late. A recent newspaper item reported that butterflies are now on the endangered species list. That small item is symbolic of our changing world. While it is sad to imagine a future without butterflies, it is doubly sad to be reminded of what we have done to ourselves and our world. It brings to mind the poignant and tragic book, I Never Saw Another Butterfly, which contains children's drawings and poems from the Terezin Concentration Camp during World War II. The children wrote of the concentration camp world, of the world outside as they remembered it, and of dreams of a better world. The writing was no doubt therapeutic for them; they needed to put it all down to keep a record, even of the fact that there were no more butterflies. The child who wrote, "But no one must give up! The world turns and times change," continued to keep some hope alive through writing.

The advice from the Concentration Camp is still good. We need to keep hope alive for a better future. In order that all of us do not say one day soon, "I never saw another butterfly," we need to be able to imagine the future and to plan for it.

Planning for utopias can be worthwhile in more ways than one. It can help the quality of the writing experience in present-day classrooms. In Imaginary Worlds, Richard Murphy describes a way of encouraging continuity of independent writing through letting children invent their own utopias. He worked with sixth and eighth graders who wrote fantasies but reflected realism in their many worlds. The children wrote about traveling to their utopias, the landscape, the people, the architecture, religion, education, and even war. Once started, the children's ideas carried them on in fascinating directions. A Massachusetts teacher reports that a ten-year old girl became interested in discovering a tenth planet after a school unit on astronomy and started an on-going story about discovering the planet, secretly building a rocket to visit the planet, and having all sorts of adventures on the way. The teacher[2] is sure that it is going to be an all-year project. The idea of other worlds seems to have enough breadth and interest to ensure self-motivated continuity of writing, so that children write as a way of life, not just in spurts for class assignments.

For teachers concerned that children should not get too far afield from what they know firsthand, a study by Smith (1970) is reassuring. Smith found that the quality of writing about personal topics and the quality of writing about other topics appear to be of similar overall quality. It appears all right, then, for children to stretch their imaginations on all kinds of topics.

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[2]Kirsten Kaiser, Florence, Massachusetts

The World of Writing...

The world of literature is another planet to consider. Literature is someone's creative writing, and, as such, can be a model and inspiration to young creative writers. Often authors use the device of going through an opening into another world to get into a story. C. S. Lewis in The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe had the children in his story go through the back of an old wardrobe into the land of Narnia. Lewis Carroll let Alice fall down a rabbit hole into Wonderland. Edward Ormondroyd arranged for Susan Shaw to go up in an elevator that did not stop until it came to the land of the Past in Time at the Top. Children can get ideas from these stories and from others like them about getting into their own imaginary stories and worlds. A few researchers, such as Pinkham (1969), have developed guidelines for using children's literature selections as models for written composition.

Virginia Hamilton in The Planet of Junior Brown writes of the world of homeless children in New York City and of the "planets" that they create for themselves in order to survive. There is surely a message in her story for children of today, children whose planet home is changing so fast that it is difficult to find any kind of permanence. The message seems to be this: To be able to survive, one must create some order in his or her own planet. The world of writing is one place to achieve some kind of satisfaction and order. Through writing, children can find ways of coping with an ever-changing world; they can experience success in their world; and they can imagine possibilities for a better future.

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